

Interview with Carroll R. Sherer

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Foreign Service Spouse Series

CARROLL R. SHERER

Interviewed by: Patricia Norlan

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Q: This is Patricia Norland. I am interviewing Carroll Sherer, who has come from Chicago to Washington, DC for the occasion of recording an oral history. The date is March 22, 1999. So now we can proceed with our interview.

Carroll, we were talking earlier about the possibility of just a few words on your early years, where you lived and schools and so on.

SHERER: Well, Pat, thanks. I was born in Chicago and went to the University of Chicago studying anthropology. While I was a student there the Second World War broke out and I rushed through college taking extra courses and studying in the summer. I graduated when I was nineteen years old and went into the Cadet Nursing Corps. At the time I thought that I was doing something to save the world, but the truth is that nursing training saved me several times when I was in the Foreign Service.

I stayed at the nursing school for a couple of years and then my best beloved came home from his missions in the central Pacific and we were married in Chicago in the church that I had always attended. By the way, he was Albert W. Sherer, Jr., who turned out to be a very good Foreign Service Officer, but we didn't know whether that would happen at the time. Well, I did, but he wasn't quite sure.

Library of Congress

We started out for our first post, Tangier, Morocco, in 1946. I was twenty-three years old and had never been outside of North America. We had a three-month-old baby, which we carried around in a basket covered with mosquito netting, as well as twelve other pieces of luggage. The State Department was not organized in those days to help with much information about the post or even how to get there. When I left home I was wearing high-heeled shoes and a little white feather hat.

We traveled on an unconverted troop ship, where we had a tiny cabin, unlike the other passengers who were assigned to sailors' quarters, hammocks and gender separated dormitories. We were privileged because of our small baby. The footlocker containing the baby's food and clothing was mistakenly packed in the hold instead of delivered to our cabin. The ship's captain was mortified, and he allowed my husband to go to the ship's kitchen and make formula. That's really all I remember. The baby survived somehow. Maybe it was a good thing there was no bar on that ship, although at the time, it seemed otherwise.

Arriving at Le Havre, we looked over the side of the ship and realized that there was only a temporary dock, the permanent ones having been destroyed by American and British bombs during the war. There was no proper exit on dock level, which meant that we had to descend on a skinny little ramp, carrying the baby in a blanket. I still remember the scary business of looking down from that ramp three stories high at the water between the ship and the dock. I still wore the high-heeled shoes and little feather hat, probably no help.

Due to a shortage of everything in Paris, there were no taxis to take us to the embassy. It was dark by that time, raining and cold, a typical October. We waited at the curb surrounded by our twelve pieces of luggage and waved at every passing vehicle. Finally, an American military Jeep stopped and took us to where we'd been assured in Washington there would be hotel reservations for us.

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But the embassy had never heard of us and besides, they said there were no rooms in the whole city. Again we were rescued by our baby, whose obvious need compelled the sergeant to discover one available room for one night, he said. Another Army vehicle was summoned and we rattled off to a fleabag hotel where there was no heat or food. Never mind, we had a roof over our heads. Their skimpy breakfast tasted like haute cuisine even though the coffee was made of Lord knows what.

We were finally allowed to stay in that room for about a week while waging the battle for onward transportation. Finally, having discovered which Frenchman was in charge of all personnel travel, an ample gift of American cigarettes procured two tickets to Madrid and we were off.

When we reached the frontier at Hendaye, the conductor explained that the border was still closed after the war and we would have to get out of the train. So out we got, counting luggage still numbering twelve pieces. The only mode of transport was a donkey cart, which we thought would take us to the next railroad station which was in the Spanish town of Irún. But nothing doing. We were dumped in the middle of a bridge and told we would have to walk to Spain if we really wanted to get there. So Albert walked to the customs shed and came back saying he would carry the luggage while I walked across with the baby in his basket. The Spanish officials were not in a hurry and besides, they were feeling mean in those days because we hadn't allowed Hitler to win the war.

Finally we got ourselves to Madrid by train, where it was warm and sunny, and we were met by someone from whatever diplomatic mission we had there at the time. I was like a child in a candy shop when he took us to the Ritz Hotel, where we signed in to a luxurious room with a real bathroom. France seemed very far away.

At the end of a train ride to Algeciras and a ferry ride across the Straits of Gibraltar, the finale of a three-week journey, we arrived at our destination, Tangier. Several members of the legation staff were there to greet us. They told us right away that housing would

Library of Congress

be difficult because the population of the international zone, which was Tangier then, was bloated with individuals left over from the war. It was said to be a refuge for Nazis of several nationalities who preferred not to go home and for smugglers. Since there was an open money market meaning that the value of all currencies was floating and could be traded at varying rates during a single day, this was a self-evident result. Besides, the zone had a free port which imported goods from all over the world duty-free, providing many opportunities.

The house we finally found had a fascinating garden full of plants mostly foreign to me, but no heating or hot running water. All the hot water we ever had came from a tank on the side of the wood-burning stove in the kitchen and whatever heat came from a tiny fireplace in the living room where we huddled for about three months each year.

Furnishing the house was the next challenge, which was solved by renting things from a variety of people who were known to someone who was known to somebody.

Soon I was pregnant again. I opted to stay there with my family and chose the British missionary hospital where there were pretty good doctors and as long as no emergency arose, an adequate staff and equipment. As it turned out, there was nothing fancy required, only a couple of whiffs of chloroform administered by means of some kind of squeeze mechanism over which I had full control. Much later, what I found out was that the medical people and the holy people had had a falling out, the holy people insisting that it was incorrect of the medics to accept European patients since they had all been sent there to convert the local population. The medics' argument that the Europeans pay and that was good moved the holy people not at all. They had locked the door of the room intended for me and the key was nowhere to be found. Finally, the doctor and Albert broke down the door with their shoulders, which, of course, wrecked the door but gave me a place to lie down.

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There was never a day in Tangier without a surprise. At the end of a highly educational three-year tour we were assigned to Calcutta, which caused me to leave Tangier a month or two ahead of Albert so I could get all the shots and buy clothes for several years for myself and two children then aged two and three.

Everything I have ever known about India came from the reading I did during that period. As it turned out, we went to Budapest instead, a welcome change, equipped with immunity to innumerable exotic diseases and forty-eight pairs of summer shoes. In the meantime, our possessions sat on the dock in Calcutta in the monsoon and didn't reach us until six months later.

The trip to Budapest overland was eventful. We had brought our car on the boat to Rotterdam and started out from there to drive across western Europe. Traveling through the zones of Germany, divided up among the French, the British, Russians, and Americans, was not easy. Each authority figure we met wanted us to explain what we were doing in the area and show authorizations. We had travel orders from the State Department, but no requisitions for overnight accommodations. Each stop was a struggle.

In Budapest, we started the long wait for housing, just as we had in Tangier. When we finally found a house the real adventure started. It had been built as a summer house by a rich Hungarian banker whose two daughters were the current owners. They were delighted to have diplomats occupying the place because they figured that would guard it from being seized by the Hungarian government, a process going on all around us. No one, including the two glamorous owners, believed that the regime would last.

Having had no instruction to the contrary, we saw as many young people as possible and gave wonderful parties which were a great success with gypsy orchestras and food from the commissary in Vienna. We didn't suspect then that some of the people who came to those parties were not on our team. The political situation, in general, and for us Americans, in particular, quickly worsened. An American businessman was arrested

Library of Congress

for spying. He was detained for a long time and finally, at a public trial he testified that everyone in the American legation was a spy. As a result, the Hungarian government demanded that the staff of the legation be reduced to eighteen persons. We were among those chosen to stay, but the parties were over. We moved into vacated U.S. government housing from the picturesque place we had rented and watched, horrified, as the society around us was dismantled. What remained of the aristocracy was deported to a far distant area and dumped. People were given a few hours to pack whatever they could carry and get ready to be trucked out. Many died on the way, no mercy being given to the infirm or the aged, and many died after reaching their destination from hunger, cold, and illness.

Among our acquaintances was a couple; the husband was an aristocrat who had married the maid. I can imagine what sort of hullabaloo that had caused years before. But the way it turned out, she was allowed to stay in Budapest with her two children and he was forced to leave. It was a gruesome time for innocent, young American ears and eyes. We were in the middle of tremendous suffering and injustice and there was absolutely nothing we could do to help.

After two years, Albert himself was declared persona non grata. We were given twenty-four hours to leave the country. The story was trumped up, but there was no point in protesting. We knew the AVO, the secret police, meant business. The big thing, we decided, was to play it cool so the children wouldn't be frightened. It was the only post I can remember where we had two personal cars, and thank Heaven! We loaded the station wagon up to the roof and left early the next morning for Vienna. I followed along after Albert, who had a loaded .45 on the seat beside him, the children and their peanut butter sandwiches in the back. I mention the gun only to show you the extent of our paranoia. We had suffered many insults including damning notes shoved under the gate outside our front door and had been called many names in the press. Extra guards were posted outside our house. It seemed possible that the Russians would try some sort of mean trick on the way.

Library of Congress

As it happened, our haste in accomplishing a speedy departure was the only cause of real difficulty. A couple of hours out of Budapest my station wagon had a flat tire. That meant that the entire contents of the car had to be unloaded at the side of the road, and when we finally got to the spare tire, it, too, was flat and the proper lug wrench was nowhere to be found. It was nothing to laugh about then, but it makes me giggle now.

We had a deadline, so we could hardly afford to waste time. Pretty soon we were rescued by a Hungarian truck driver who saw the pitiful sight and stopped to help, but the fifteen minutes we spent waiting were tense. He was driving a Russian truck which had an air compressor under the hood. He took one look and perceived exactly what was needed. Very shortly, we were on our way again, musing about his reaction to my gift of a couple of packages of American cigarettes. He almost fainted!

It was early on in the story of East/West relations and having diplomats unceremoniously expelled from their posts was not yet commonplace. We needed a rest and we got one in Vienna. When the Department asked where we would like to go, we replied "Home." So we had a tour in Washington, which was a delight and much needed.

In our next post, Prague, we were cut off from the world around us right from the beginning. We were even obligated to go to a government agency, as we had in Budapest, to hire servants. This was one of the many ways the Czechs had of keeping tabs on everything we said and did. I didn't mind that, but several wives had breakdowns and had to leave.

To preserve our sanity and create some entertainment we indulged in all sorts of amateur theatricals. We composed a musical comedy called "La Vie en Rouge," in which almost all the young diplomats of the Western group participated, bringing a wide variety of interpretations to our script and providing an inexhaustible source of merriment to all. Even though it was a corny amateur satire, our ambassador, U. Alexis Johnson, preferred not to have it performed in the empty swimming pool in his residence. We thought that narrow-

Library of Congress

minded at the time, but years later, when we went to Prague as chief of mission, we were embarrassed to think we had even asked.

I liked it there. We had a very nice apartment in the chancery building and I had a good job teaching three diplomatic daughters, teenagers, by the Calvert System.

Soon, on a visit to London, I hired an English nanny because the lovely girls provided by the Office of Services in Prague were simply not up to the task. One of them, I was informed by the Israeli ambassador, was a call girl at the Alcron Hotel. When she finally found a man who would get her out of the country, I lent her my best suitcase, which she promised to leave at the embassy in Vienna; but, of course, I never saw it again.

Let me tell you the story of the nanny. She was twenty-five years old, plain and seemingly earnest. She assured me that she was devoted to reading, crossword puzzles, embroidery, stamp collecting, and things like that, and that she understood completely the admonition against fraternizing with Czechs. The first night she was in Prague, the cook I had, who spoke almost no English, but was about the same age as the nanny, Barbara, asked me if she could take Barbara out that evening for a look at the town. I thought that was a friendly idea and off they went. They had a delightful time, enhanced greatly by having two appealing young men ask to join them at their table in the caf#. Both of these young men were oboe players. One took a special shine to Barbara.

As time went on, Zdenek showered her with attention, gave her chocolates, threw roses through the window, kissed her hand. The poor, simple girl was hooked! A few months later, it was no surprise, although a great disappointment, to have her own up to being pregnant. So I sent her home to have her baby so it would have a British passport, but not until after a grand wedding in the Saint Vitus church, with the friend oboe-player playing Smetana accompanied by the organ.

A few months later, we had a repeat performance when the cook, Anna, announced that she was also pregnant. I dressed her up in my best clothes, and the whole family went

Library of Congress

back to the Saint Vitus church for another wedding. This time it was the husband of the nanny playing Dvorak in the loft with the organ. I can honestly say that I have never felt the same about the oboe!

The embassy staff, the same as in Budapest when we were there, had been pared down to sixteen people because of an American who was still in custody. William Otis, the AP correspondent, had testified that the FSOs were spying. Having so few people drew everyone closer and seemed to increase morale rather than the other way around. As a result of having such a limited staff, the officers took turns sleeping in the code room at night.

On the night of Anna's wedding, one of my husband's many turns, a strange thing happened. I was at home after having gone out to a dinner party in the apartment of colleagues living on the opposite side of the building, a huge palace. I assumed that the new nanny, Millie, was in her room sound asleep and the children were tucked in their beds, as usual. But about three o'clock in the morning our dog began to bark furiously and soon there was a rap on my bedroom door. I flung on the old coat, which was the dog's bed, and opened the door. There was a man I had never seen before, speaking in rapid Czech and explaining he wanted political asylum. I wasn't frightened because he didn't put his hand on the door or make any effort to get closer to me. I closed the door and went to the Army field telephone in my bedroom to call the code room. Albert must have plugged everything into the switchboard because drowsy military attach#s and Foreign Service Officers began appearing at my door in their bathrobes. Our visitor's story was that he had been discussing the very recent Hungarian Revolution with someone he met in a train that day. He claimed to be so sympathetic to the Hungarians that the police had removed him from the train at the next stop where he managed to escape. Whoever had sent him must have thought the Americans were hopelessly naive because it was obvious from the beginning that he was a provocateur.

Library of Congress

Soon Albert called and asked one of the assembled to come take his place in the code room so he could question the impostor himself. He and the other second secretary, Joe Jacyno, a Marine colonel in World War II and a fluent Czech speaker since childhood, took the man to an empty office, shined a light in his eyes just the way they'd seen it done in the movies, and questioned him until they found out how he had penetrated the embassy from a public park next door. They escorted him to the place he said he had entered where there was a high wall, and tossed him over.

I believed then, and still do, that Millie was his guide. The next morning she was not in her room and she explained that she'd gotten so drunk at Anna's wedding party after the wedding that she couldn't come home. Those of us who were present that night decided among ourselves that we would not repeat this story to anybody because it was so upsetting to think that the embassy could be penetrated, and as far as I know, nobody ever mentioned it again.

Warsaw, our next post in Eastern Europe, was most challenging. We were there for five years, long enough to learn the language pretty well and to make some interesting friends among the painters and other creative people. We had had a Washington assignment in between, and by that time, Poland was the target of much of the activity of USIA aimed at furthering President Kennedy's policy of cultural change on all levels. We had a steady flow of writers, movie actors, and medical people who came to lecture and spread the word that the United States would like to cozy up any time Poland was ready.

We had John Steinbeck and Edward Albee both in town at the time of President Kennedy's assassination. As the newspapers and radio reported, there was a most impressive display of admiration and love of Kennedy and of the United States, all over Poland. The lobby of the embassy was so crowded with ordinary citizens wanting to sign the condolence book that on two occasions an ambulance had to be summoned.

Library of Congress

The tour in Warsaw taught me how much fun it is to be working in a country where things are always improving, because you feel as though you must have something to do with that process. That's not to say that we didn't have the same, old vigilance by the secret police that we'd grown accustomed to over the years in other posts. We lived in a tiny duplex row house, so tapping into what was going on in our place was no problem. During a routine sweep of all the residences, a recording machine with a working tape on it was discovered under the floorboards where the coffee table stood in our living room, the center of our home life.

Once a year, the embassy wives put on a sale of all sorts of items donated mostly by people who were transferred that year. The proceeds were used to pay for a Christmas party for the staff. We called the sale Bialy Slon, a literal translation of "white elephant." The goods we had for sale were available for purchase only to employees of our embassy, who anticipated the event all year and lined up to get in well ahead of time.

There are lots of funny things to remember about those sales, such as the coat from the ambassador's closet donated by his wife, which turned out to be his favorite. You might think we would quietly have returned it to its owner, but instead, at his wife's insistence, he was required to come in person and buy it back. That was John Moors Cabot, whose wife, Elizabeth Cabot, was my mentor. We became very fast friends during those years in Poland, and we remained very close up to the time of her death many years later.

I had one big heartbreak while we were in Warsaw. One of the most valued local employees, whom we will call Alex, had an aortic aneurysm which had reached the stage of being a real life threat and could not be dealt with in Poland at that time as it would have been in the United States. During a visit of a group of cardiologists from Michael DeBakey's clinic in Houston I mentioned Alex and how much I'd like to see him fixed up. He was only in his early forties, had a family, and potentially many useful years ahead.

Library of Congress

I sent the doctors his x-rays and they proposed that Alex come to Houston where they would free of charge do the needed surgery.

As the correspondence continued and I learned more about the time required for recovery, I began to worry whether Alex wouldn't die of loneliness in Houston after a successful surgery had been performed. So I began corresponding with Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, where we had some connections, and finally decided that if Alex and his family really wanted to take the risk of sending him all that way, Boston would be a better place because there's a large Polish population which could be counted on to receive him as one of their own.

All the complicated arrangements were made. Alex was prepared for the trip even though I think he probably had never been in an airplane before. He was extremely intelligent, a fluent English speaker, and seemed enthusiastic, as did his wife, about having a future free of the kind of threat he'd been living with for years.

The distressing and disappointing denouement of this story is that on the day before his scheduled departure Alex died. It was truly a stunning blow felt by everyone in the embassy.

Among the several demonstrations the embassy suffered during that time was one by Cuban students who still had the Bay of Pigs in mind. Their weapon of choice was frozen potatoes, which they hurled the distance from the street to the enormous plate glass windows at the front of our building about twenty yards away, actually breaking the windows, which had to be boarded up for weeks while new glass was manufactured in Belgium and shipped to Poland.

I don't know exactly how my husband did it, but he went down — he was DCM then — to the gate, opened it, and managed to quiet the students. His nickname was always “Bud,” and when we left Warsaw, one of the gifts that was given to us by the staff was a treated potato on a little brass stand with a plaque saying, “A spud for Bud.” The British

Library of Congress

ambassador's comment about this incident was, "That's what you get for teaching them to play baseball."

After Warsaw came five years in West Africa. I made the initial trip with my husband to villages in Togo, his first ambassadorial post. One hundred and ten Peace Corps volunteers were working there. It was my African baptism. We traveled in a Volkswagen truck which turned out to be the perfect vehicle because we came home with numerous gifts including multitudes of mangoes, ten pineapples, a live lamb, and five guinea hens.

Ceremonies in each of the villages were impressive: dancing, feasting, many speeches, many firecrackers. I knew I had a lot to learn about eating with my hands, especially if I was served fofou, the national favorite made of boiled, pounded manioc formed in the shape and size of a healthy snowball. It looks and tastes like library paste, accompanied by a hot pepper sauce, which also presents a formidable learning experience.

I could see right away that I would have nothing to do at home. The household hardly needed me. So having noticed several sources of attractive art objects on our trip, I decided it would be interesting to try to commercialize them. The Minister of Commerce gave me his blessing, and the embassy gave me space in the transient apartment which was never used. Most of the embassy wives gave me wholehearted support, including some financial help, and we went into business. After three weeks we could see that we could not keep the place stocked with the trinkets and ceramics we were able to collect; so we decided to start designing clothes made from African fabrics.

The Germans had built a textile factory in Lomé using cotton from Togo and Dahomey, which we decided would be our single source because it was local. To make a long story short, the caftans, pants suits, men's jackets, neckties, and other garments we were able to produce sold quickly, and local people began coming in with bangles and handpainted note cards to sell, which added to our stock.

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The shop was located on the main road from Accra to Lagos, and it soon became a target for people traveling that route along the coast. We were given a great boost by an article about our little enterprise in the New York Times, which promised that for fifteen dollars we would send out one of our "beautiful caftans." So we were in the mail order business overnight. It was exciting. We were providing more and more jobs. We had a little outbuilding where carpenters worked making small pieces of African furniture from local teak. Women in the atelier did the sewing, and men working separately from them did the embroidery. We even had classy fashion shows using pretty local girls whom we trained in the technique of the runway.

I designed the clothes myself, which eventually sold well at Garfinckel's in Washington and Carson Pirie's in Chicago, where we exported men's bathrobes. Several specialty shops also carried our wares. I did plenty of copying, I can tell you that, but it worked and we had a very successful time. I'd never had so much fun before in the Service.

My promise to the Togolese government was that I would never take any profit, that I would reinvest in the business and hand it over to them to run as a national enterprise. That is what happened in spite of an effort by Clark Mollenhoff, President Johnson's scout assigned to ferret out wrongdoing in the executive branch. He made a fuss with the State Department because of an article about the boutique which appeared in the Washington Star. His letter to Richard F. Peterson, the counselor of the State Department, read, "I would appreciate a full report on the investment of Mrs. Sherer, the time when she made the investment, and the amount of the profits from this investment."

In the end, we did turn the shop over to the minister of Culture, as promised, who appointed a man I had worked with a lot from the Bureau of Tourism to head it up. There were two Peace Corps volunteers, one a designer and one a business school graduate, and quite a lot of money in dollars in a Chicago bank and CFAs in a French bank in Lomé.

Library of Congress

The end of the story is sad. A year and a half later, I am told, there was nothing to be seen of our effort. I like to think that if I had stayed another five years, it would have turned out differently.

We were in Lomé at the time of the first moon landing. The next day an epidemic of conjunctivitis broke out in the capital city. The entire population knew immediately where it came from. The epidemic was referred to then and forever as Apollo Onze because “everyone knows that humans should not be meddling around with the moon.”

One realizes very soon that in Africa mystery is always in the air. It's an unfathomable part of the culture that one must learn to accept, not question, and be satisfied that there is a barrier there that the ordinary foreigner will never scale.

The story of the blouse, for instance, is an example. It was an ordinary blouse, nothing to write home about, but I couldn't find it. The fact that something was missing caused a furor in the house. It was a sort of silent furor, everyone secretly distressed. The situation became so tense that I asked the local employee of the embassy who was in charge of everything domestic to come out to talk it over with me and the ten people who composed our staff. When he said at the meeting, “You know how old Madame is because you have seen her children,” I realized I was as big a mystery to them as they were to me. He explained to them that it was my desire to let them all go if within three days the blouse was not found. Then there was a very helpful suggestion from one of the house men. “If Madame will permit it, at the end of three days we will call the fetisheur. He will tell us where the blouse is and how it got there.” Everyone agreed that was a fair solution. They would all accept the result no matter what it was. I was disappointed when the procedure proved unnecessary because the next day I found the blouse on the top of my car and the incident was never mentioned again.

From there we went on to the Republic of Guinea, a country seven degrees north of the equator, with a better climate than Togo and rich in natural resources. The limiting factor

Library of Congress

there was an attempted coup against the strongman president, Sekou Tour#. The attack came around two o'clock in the morning from the air and the sea. There was firing from the sea, from boats that came from we didn't know where, and from planes. I don't remember any bombs, but I do remember heavy artillery fire and a command from my husband to get down on the floor.

One of the Peace Corps volunteers was wounded, but otherwise our personnel were physically unharmed. Survival remained our main effort for the rest of our two-year stay. Solders were stationed in our garden, which had an advantageous view of the coast, and stayed there for what seemed an eternity. It was concluded by the government that the so-called invasion was the work of the Germans working through NATO. Their embassy was soon closed and they all went home. Ravings in the newspaper continued, and so did our curfew. Once again, we were forced to use our ingenuity to protect our sanity.

My interviewer today is Pat Norland, the wife of the DCM in Guinea when we were there. She has some things, perhaps, to add to what I've said. Pat?

Q: I do have some interesting memories from that place. We were awakened at two o'clock in the morning when the German attach# who lived next door pounded on the window saying, "We're being invaded! We're being invaded! From the sea!" Across the inlet we could see Sekou Tour#'s summer home ablaze. Firing and explosions could also be heard, and rumors were soon rife. At dawn we went out to our rocky beach and encountered armed soldiers who very firmly ordered us to go back into the house, which we did, but not before glimpsing the silhouettes of ships on the horizon. There were military men coming along the beach telling everybody to stay in and stay off the beaches and get back into their houses and so on. Eventually they left, but the attack had a long and deleterious effect on the whole country. It was very sad. The population became increasingly more paranoid as more and more people were pulled in and treated terribly, arrested and thrown into this awful prison. What was it called? Camp Boiro. That was the end of the road.

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One of the very interesting and promising Guinean diplomats was Bangoura Karim who had served as a popular ambassador in Washington and at the UN. We had just met him and he seemed like such a promising, enthusiastic diplomat. He, with many others, too succumbed to Camp Boiro.

One morning, American school children on their bus as it passed beneath a bridge looked out to see dead bodies swinging from above. People were just killed and hung up there as a lesson. So it just brought an awful pall over the whole country. It was a very sad event.

One of the funny things that happened, however, arose from the fact that we were serving there at the same time as the Russians and other Communist countries, who were welcomed in Guinea, but we had very little contact with them. I do remember one time we decided to go out as an embassy group to the one place where you could find a pool, a nice natural pool with a cliff over the top and water pouring down over it in falls, and beaches where you could have your lunch. So we all went out and at the other end of the beach, the far end, we found that the Russians had come, but we did not speak to them and they did not speak to us. But when we went into the pool and went underneath the waterfall and all the foam and mist thrown out by this waterfall, the Russians got on the other side of that. They smiled at us and were quite delighted to see us! Then we went back through the falls and we all returned to our opposite ends of the beach.

We were very fortunate to have the Sherers as our ambassador and wife, and Carroll and I used to have a little thing going down at the embassy, which was one of the worst-looking buildings you've ever seen in your life! So I'll let her go on with that.

SHERER: Well, Pat, thanks a lot.

There were very few trained house servants left after a while. Those who could all fled to the Ivory Coast or over to Senegal. As there were plenty of people who needed jobs, Pat Norland, sitting right here beside me, the wife of the DCM, and I started what we called our

Library of Congress

"#cole M#nag#re." The students, all men, learned how to set the table and how to serve. It was quite a challenge. Some of our graduates actually got satisfactory jobs. At least they were quiet because none of them had shoes.

Pat and I made our next project the beautification of the embassy. We had no money, but we did have paint and we did have posters from USIA, and we went about our project very seriously. When we had used up all the available supplies, we judged the result to be a miracle!

Then there were the theatricals. We had plenty of those, the best medicine of all. Some were original and composed to commemorate anything we felt like commemorating and written by anyone who wished to participate. I have a copy of one of them entitled "The Potato Salad Problem," which attests to the depth of our desperation, although at the time we thought they were hilarious masterpieces.

From Guinea we went back to Prague, our old and familiar stamping ground. The ambassador's residence is a grand palace where we discovered the same wonderful chef we had known there in 1955. It was almost like coming home. The political situation was better than in the '50s, but people were dismal because of the failure of Prague Spring in '68. By that time, Millie, the nanny I had had seventeen years earlier, had a job as an accountant in the embassy, and Anna was cooking for a diplomatic family, both of them doubtless up to their official tricks, I suppose, by this time very professional.

My household necessitated four chambermaids who were good at their jobs, but were constantly at each other's throats. When I hired a housekeeper who had a variety of duties besides supervising them, it was worse. The reason for that was that the housekeeper was not from the working class, so she was resented and vilified for no really good reasons. I kept her anyway because having her there relieved me somewhat of having to participate personally in the battles.

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The provocations continued. There were constantly strange happenings. For example, one night when I was dressing for dinner — I remember it was a black-tie dinner — the telephone in my room rang and it was the chef downstairs, who said to me, “Madame, il a eu un accident # la maison.” I thought, well, he's chopped his nose again, which he used to do from time to time when he was having a tantrum. But he said, “There's a Russian in the Herrensalon.” So I did what I always did in circumstances of that nature. The guests were about to arrive. I hurriedly called the DCM [deputy chief of mission] who lived in the house on the other side of the garden. He was a good Russian speaker. He came over and sat down with this fellow who said that he'd been driving by in a tourist bus that afternoon and they had pointed out that that's where the American ambassador lives. He would like political asylum. Well, it was Art Wortzel, who was very diplomatic, very wonderful, and was able to dissuade the man; and he got him out of the house somehow before our guests arrived, or maybe after. I don't even remember that part. Little events like that took place from time to time, so we knew we were being tested.

After a year and a half in Prague, my husband was assigned to Geneva to head up the U.S. delegation to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which in 1976 produced what was called the Helsinki Final Act, the trigger that set off the end of the Cold War.

We had a small apartment in Geneva, so small that the beds came out of the wall at night, filling up the room which was dining room and writing room in the daytime, the greatest possible contrast to our living circumstances in Prague, where we commuted at irregular intervals.

I had a wonderful time roaming the streets of Geneva and keeping house in my mini-flat. It was difficult keeping up with business in two such different posts, but that was what presented constant challenges and never left time for boredom.

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After the Helsinki Final Act was signed in August of '75, we went on to the UN. During that time, we suffered a tremendous loss. Our best Foreign Service friend, Francis E. Meloy, godfather to our eldest child, was ambassador to Lebanon, where he was kidnaped and murdered by the PLO. It was a blow from which we never recovered.

What I'd like to tell now is a little bit about my husband, Albert W. Sherer, Jr., known to friends and colleagues as "Bud." He was born in Wheaton, Illinois, but his family soon moved to Chicago because of schools. He did his undergraduate work at Yale, majoring in international affairs, always with the idea of joining the Foreign Service as soon as possible.

His father was keen on having him acquire a second string to his bow, so he went to the Harvard Law School, graduating in 1941. He enlisted in the Air Force and trained as a navigator. I guess he must have been good at it because the Air Force used him at first for special missions like navigating General Arnold to the Casablanca Conference. Later, the Seventh Air Force took him to the Pacific, where he survived thirty missions as did everyone in his crew, the only crew out of the squadron to come home with the same plane and the same men intact.

When his missions were over, he came home and began courting me in earnest. It didn't take long. Our parents had been friends for many years, and I know had discreetly plotted that we should hook up. Even though I was twenty-one and he was twenty-eight when we married, it worked.

He had the Foreign Service in mind as firmly as ever, rather more firmly because of the trauma of the war and what it had taught him about the necessity of trying to prevent a repeat of that awful period of his life. He was a very mild-mannered man and modest. It is hard to figure out how and why he was such an outstanding leader, but I need to try.

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First of all, he had a tremendous amount of physical courage. Presented with a daunting situation, he remained undaunted. For example, when we were in Guinea and his General Services officer was jailed by the police, he got into his car with the flag flying and drove himself to the police station where he explained that he was not leaving until they gave him the goods, which they did very rapidly. We all felt safe in his care and the young men wanted to be like him. As I said, he had a great gift for leadership.

In closing, I would like to read from a speech entitled "Diplomacy as a Profession," given by George Kennan to the Foreign Service Association in 1961. It is eloquent and as true today as the day he delivered it.

"This is the classic function of diplomacy: to effect the communication between one's own government and other governments or individuals abroad, and to do this with maximum accuracy, imagination, tact, and good sense. What is important in the relations between two governments is not just, or predominantly, the what, but rather the how: the approach, the posture, the manner, the style of action. The most brilliant undertaking can be turned into a failure if it is clumsily and tactlessly executed. There are, on the other hand, few blunders which cannot be survived, if not redeemed, when matters are conducted with grace and with feeling. To some extent, I fear, the professional diplomatist will always remain in his own country and particularly in this one a person apart, the bearer of a view of the outside world which his fellow citizens cannot entirely follow and a view of his own country, while it does not cause him to love it the less, causes him to see it in other ways than his neighbors at home can ever be expected to see it. For these reasons, diplomacy is always going to consist to some extent of serving people who do not know that they are being served, who do not know that they need to be served, who misunderstand and occasionally abuse the very effort to serve. It takes a special love of country to pursue with love and faith and cheerfulness work for which no parades will ever march, no crowds will cheer, no bands will play."

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I feel compelled to add before concluding this interview that it was never a one-way street between me and the Foreign Service. When I consider the enriching experiences I have had, the languages I have been obliged to learn, the creative people whose paths crossed with mine in the normal course of a day's work, and the ingenuity I was forced to use to insure the survival of my family, I realize what a wonderful life it was. Looking back has been a healthy exercise. Besides, I have to admit that C S DESIGNS, Inc., my little interior design company, would not exist had I not had so much practice in making homes out of houses, eighteen of them over the years. In the years of my widowhood, I feel it has saved me. "Thanks, Foreign Service!"

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Spouse: Albert W. Sherer, Jr.

Spouse's Position: All jobs from 3rd secretary to AEP

Spouse Entered Service:1946Left Service: 197You Entered Service:SameLeft Service: Same

Status: Spouse of retiree

Posts: 1946-49Tangier, Morocco1949-51Budapest, Hungary1951-55Washington, DC1955-57Prague, Czechoslovakia1957-60Washington, DC1960-61Cambridge, Massachusetts, Center for International Affairs, Harvard1961-66Warsaw, Poland1966-68Inspection Corps1968-70Lom#, Togo and Equatorial Guinea1970-72Conakry, Republic of Guinea1972-75Prague, Czechoslovakia1973-75Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Geneva1975-77United Nations Security Council1978CSCE Follow-up meeting, Belgrade

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Place/Date of birth: July 23, 1923; Chicago, Illinois

Maiden Name: Carroll D. Russell

Parents:

Paul S. Russell, banker

Carroll M. Russell, dancer

Schools:

St Mary's-in-the-Mountains, Littleton, New Hampshire

University of Chicago, BA

Profession:Interior design

Date/Place of Marriage: Chicago, 1944

Children: ThreePositions held (Please specify Volunteer or Paid): A. At Post: Teacher, International Schools, several posts

B. In Washington, DC: Teacher, Brookland Child Center, for learnindisabled children

End of interview